



I gave me genuine pleasure to receive at last a long letter from dear old Robert, imploring me to make him a visit. Since he had gone on his mad gold-hunting career years ago he had passed from view. True, he had written glowing letters at first, never failing in efforts to infuse into my blood the heat and eagerness with which his continually boiled, and forever seeking to sting me with veiled sneers for the quieter and more peaceful life that I had chosen to lead; but his letters had ceased long ago, no doubt from disgust for my lack of spirit and enterprise. Therefore his cordial letter came as a welcome surprise.

He must have been keenly anxious for me to come, for his letter was exceedingly nervous and impressive. He painted the glowing marvels of the desert with his old-time fervid skill, and told of the exhilarating earthquakes that lent a zest to his desolate environment. It happened that I had long desired to visit that strange wild corner in the southern end of California.

It was a brilliant July morning when I left San Diego and headed across the mesa for the Volcan Mountains, northeastwardly about eighty miles away. There, on the summit, in a gray mining town set like a pearl in the midst of an emerald forest, dear old Robert met me. I was glad to see him, and his manifestly uncontrollable delight upon seeing me was infinitely touching. He embraced me again and again; he shed tears; he danced about in childish delight; he called me all manner of ridiculous names.

We started early the next morning, for

he was "working," he said, on the very edge of the Colorado Desert, fifty miles further away. It was evident that he was under a heavy tension which he tried hard to conceal, and that he had something in store for me which he was not ready to divulge. He had already told me that he had sent for me to make me rich; but I had paid little attention to that, knowing too well the visionary ways and dazzling hopes that forever keep the blood of the gold-hunter aboil. No doubt he was sincere, but I surmised that the gold had not yet been found. He talked of everything but his "work." He dwelt fondly upon the happy college days, only ten years past. He listened eagerly to my account of my struggles and small triumphs. Indeed, but for the shadowy weight that hung about him, the moments of profound abstraction that came over him, he seemed the dear old Robert of old—buoyant, elastic, full of jest and quip, but in some ways sadly deteriorated. Not much past thirty, he seemed past forty. His face was deeply wrinkled, his shoulders had a perceptible stoop.

Down the eastern slope of the wooded Volcan range we plunged by an intricate winding road into the shining San Felipe valley, whose eastern boundary was the dreariest of naked rocky mountains, forecast and guardian of the drearier desert that stretched away from their eastern base. Down the San Felipe valley we drove to its debouchure upon the vast desert, and entered upon the forbidding billowy ocean of burning sand. But we did not strike boldly out into the wilderness. Instead, we hug-

ged the Cuyamaca Mountains to the southward.

It was in the beginning of a brilliant starry night when we reached what he called his "place." It was the oddest little house of adobes, with massive walls. "We need shelter only from the sun," he explained; "it rarely rains here." He attended deftly to his domestic work, including the care of his horses and the preparation of supper; and all the while an uncommon silence sat upon him. I wondered whether the great dumb spirit of the desert had settled down irremediably upon him, or whether something heavier crowded against his soul.

After supper we went out and sat under the stars. I observed that the house was planted at the base of a remarkable symmetrical mountain of a parabolic contour that rose black and bold against the sky. I had noticed it as we approached, but a whirling dust had obscured it and withdrawn my attention. Now, the wind having fallen, a perfect stillness filled the air—a palpitating, ponderable stillness—and with it a vast and inconceivable silence. No chirp of a cricket was to be heard, no cry of a night-bird. Impenetrable solitude, immeasurable desolation invested this bleached skeleton of the world; and in the deepest soul of me I wondered how a human being reared as dear old Robert had been could spend more than a few curious days in this dead and silent loneliness. Here must the soul shrink under the tremendous and implacable pressure of emptiness, this huge, overwhelming vacuum of terrors. In my heart I pitied the fine, strong man who was giving his life for whatever of treasure this desolation might yield.

I called his attention to the singular mountain upreared beside us. Instantly he was transfigured. He sat bareheaded in the warm, wine-laden air, and in the light of the stars I could see the perpetual tension of his body drawn tighter and his eyes kindle with the familiar madness of the gold-hunter.

"That," he cried, rising and extending his arms as though to embrace the giant black dome, "that is my treasure, that is my mountain of gold." Then, his excitement increasing, he turned upon me, and with the fierceness that I had already seen, continued: "My mountain of gold! Do you un-

derstand? It is part yours and part mine; but——" He looked suspiciously about, as though there were the remotest possibility of his secret's being learned from his indiscretion, and then, drawing closer to me, he half whispered: "Did you see those poor fools working at the mines that we passed on our way from the summit? What are they doing? Molding in slates and schists; mulling and sweating to drag out gross earth and rock that is stitched here and there with a tiny shining thread of gold; crushing and grinding and amalgamating this stupendous mass for the trifling treasure that steam and mercury drag from its unwilling bowels—bah! Here, in my splendid mountain is a mass of solid virgin gold, held fast in its sheath of honest stone, awaiting brains and hands to lay its glories open to the sun!"

Thus, in breathless eloquence, he continued, giving me a wonderful account of the obscure natural agencies that had been storing this mineral in the heart of his mountain for uncountable aeons. Swinging into another tack, he went on:

"And the earthquakes! You have never felt one. In your snug cramped rookery which you call a city, your pusillanimous blood-sucking San Francisco, you have had what you call earthquakes, puny quiverings lasting a few seconds and sending your women night-gowned into hotel corridors." He interrupted himself to laugh with mocking glee. "And you call those earthquakes—little shiverings that do not loosen a brick! You shall see what an earthquake is—right here, where you sit. For you are in the heart of giant forces whose splendor you cannot comprehend. And what are they doing? They are making gold!—gold by the ton, not by the thread! Where the earthquake is, there also is gold; it is the throb of the mighty loom that weaves this glorious fabric. Here are the most violent, the most splendid earthquakes in North America. Hardly a day passes but that you find yourself swaying and tripped on the desert, and sprawling in foolish helplessness. That is the earthquake, and it is here that you learn to grasp its majesty. Observe the walls of this house—low, a yard thick, and half straw, to secure lightness and elasticity. And observe that, safe as the walls are, I deem it wiser always to

sleep outdoors. Ah, that is the glory of an earthquake!"

I had been so overwhelmed by the fiery eloquence of my old friend, so swept along by his impetuosity, that I had forgotten the earthquakes until he mentioned them now; and since silence had suddenly fallen upon him, as though he were exhausted, I presently asked him how he knew that the mountain contained a mass of gold—if he had seen indications of it.

"Indications!" he cried. "By indications you mean the paltry shallow devices of the mining prospector, who digs for gold only when he sees it on the surface. Bah! Indications! It has been the pleasure of the great God not to limit my sense to my eyes!"

That was the last flurry. It was evident that he had quite worn himself out; for presently he wearily observed that I must be tired and that I had better go to sleep. He fetched cots from the house and set them on the sand, and there we composed ourselves for the night. It was all strange, weird, unwholesome. As I lay looking up at the stars and enjoying their friendly, knowing twinkle, the events of the day and evening swept before me as a curiously distorted phantasmagoria. Dear old Robert's secret had come out at last—his poor strained wits pictured a mass of gold in the heart of the mountain! But why had he sent for me? Of what use could I be? What plans had he, if any, for disemboweling the earth-giant? Perhaps, after all, he wanted me merely because his sense of desolation had become insupportable.

The hut was close to the base of the mountain. As I lay looking at the stars in the barren desolation that lay upon the place like a pall I could hear the water of Robert's spring trickling from the base of the mountain. He had already told me something about it, and hinted mysteriously at things associated with it. I knew that the water was boiling hot and that he had ollas for cooling it.

An unaccountable sense of danger began to oppress me. A distant rumbling, not greatly unlike the approach of a hurricane, stole gradually upon the stillness of the night. The gurgling of the spring changed in character, slowly becoming more vociferous. Although I could not see

it in the darkness, I turned my face in its direction, for it was not more than forty yards away. In a few minutes I beheld a curious spectacle. Simultaneously with a slight jolt that barely shook my cot came an explosive puff of steam from the spring, shooting straight into the air. Then all was silence and stillness again. Assuming that this was an ordinary occurrence, and that the spring had an occasional geyser-like character, I felt no increased uneasiness.

Then came another and severer jolt of my couch, and with it a tremendous explosion from the spring, sending up a high column of steam, water and mud, some of which, in falling, fell upon us. Robert waked with a start and bounded from his cot. He stood perfectly still for a moment. Surely something extraordinary must have happened, for, accustomed as he was to the earthquakes of the region, and there having been as yet but two slight shocks, here he was standing as a petrification of awe, his unwilling gaze fixed immovable upon the mountain.

I rose to a sitting posture upon the edge of my cot; that drew his notice. He sprang at me, gripped my shoulder, and wildly said, with loud exultation:

"It has come at last, sooner than I had thought. Warnings of it have been coming. Thank God that you are here in time to behold it, to enjoy it with me! Come back out of danger!"

He jerked me to my feet and dragged me away toward the open desert. I disengaged his clutch, passed my arm about him and said calmly:

"Robert, I am surprised that you have so little self-control—that you are so easily alarmed."

"Bah! man, don't be a fool!" he exclaimed. "Do you understand what is going on? Does the transformation of the spring into a geyser carry no hint to your dull mind? Why, man, we are in the beginning of one of those mighty convulsions that rend worlds. This is more than an earthquake—it is a cataclysm. Can't you picture those splendid imprisoned Titans in their subterranean dungeons massing their strength to rend the roof that holds them down?"

"Be rational, Robert," I interrupted, as we still hurried on into the desert. "Tell

me what you mean—a volcanic eruption?"

"No, no!—an upheaval, a giant uplifting, the crashing and splitting open of great mountains of solid stone. And—mark me—my mountain will be rended and its dazzling treasures of gold laid open to our hands!"

What more he might have said was cut short by a tremendous earth-surge that sent us to the ground as ninepins. We scrambled for a footing, digging our hands into the yielding sand, and were thrown again. There we lay helpless, while the mighty forces of the temblor were abroad in the depths. Deep hoarse rumblings started heavy palpitations in the air, and vast heaving billows of sand swept over the desert.

Following Robert's example, I had turned to face the mountain; thus we lay rocking, our chins propped in our hands, while every moment brought augmented fury to the tumult. The stars danced wildly to and fro; the whole brilliant firmament swung, swayed and quivered. From the spring came loud roars, accompanied with outbursts of steam and boiling mud. A wall of the hut came down with a crash, sending up a cloud of dust; the horses, tethered in the open, plunged, reared, fell and screamed.

"It is glorious!" cried Robert.

A series of noises unlike the others now began to pack the air. Seemingly mountains of stone were being ground to powder in the hands of the subterranean gods. Momentarily the deafening crunching increased. Then came the awful end—a stupendous, inconceivable crash, as though the world were split in twain, and—

I was the first to regain consciousness. A frightful pain racked my head; my face was covered with coagulated blood mixed with sand; my mouth and nostrils were filled with sand; harsh pains darted through my frame when I moved. I crawled to Robert as he lay motionless, and found him insensible and breathing heavily.

The desert had resumed its awful silence and stillness, for the convulsion was wholly spent. I staggered to the ruined hut, not a wall of which was left standing, found water, carried it to Robert, bathed his face, chafed his wrists, and presently was gratified to see his eyes open wide, stare at the quiet stars for a moment, and then turn

their gaze upon me.

"Robert," I said softly.

He sighed, clasped his bursting head in his hands, and with my aid sat up, and let his face sink between his upraised knees. I gave him water to drink, and this refreshed him wonderfully; the old fire returned to his eyes, the old eager virility to his muscles. Clinging to me, he staggered to his feet, and then slowly and fearfully turned to face the mountain. Instantly a wild exultation filled him. He threw his arms aloft and shouted:

"The Titans have opened the door of the treasure-house—see! the mountain is split from dome to base!"

Sure enough, a wide crevice, through which some western stars shone at the mountain's crest, and which looked a black streak below the sky-line, widened from the base to the summit; it was the opening of this that had crushed us with its din.

"The egg-shell is cracked!" Robert almost screamed; "we will now dig out the beautiful rich yolk!"

Day was dawning. I insisted that we have breakfast before making an exploration, and it was hard to hold the dear madman down to it. At sunrise we started.

For the first time I saw clearly the singular mountain. It was a vast dome of solid rock, polished by ages of exposure to the wind-driven sand. Only in a very few places had irregularities been left sufficient to afford a footing. From the ruins of the hut Robert dug a small hatchet and a leather hunting-bag, the strap of which he slung over his shoulder.

"You may go with me and see the gold if you like," said he; "and you might be of help to me; but it will be too dangerous for your inexperienced legs and feet to enter the chasm. I alone will do that for the present." A wonderful—I feared an ominous—calm had fallen upon him. He seemed too cool, confident, deliberate, pre-occupied. A momentary burst of fire welled up when he added, as he clutched my arm: "Old man, we are going to quarry the gold—not mine it." Instantly he was quiet again—evidence of his knowledge that supreme self-command was required.

I felt apprehensive. "Robert," I suggested, "would it not be best to wait a

few days—at least a day—to be sure that the earthquake has entirely passed?”

He looked at me calmly and pityingly, and replied: “The earthquake never passes here;” and then we assailed the mountain.

Up we clambered, breasting the clean, steep, slippery slope. Robert was very patient with my slower progress, and gave me a hand in difficult places. Hours of laborious and exhausting work were consumed in bringing us to the summit. “The crust above the gold is very thin there,” explained Robert calmly, as though every secret of the dome were revealed to him.

At last we stood upon the summit, and Robert ran to the brink of the chasm ahead of me and peered down; then he dropped to his stomach and gazed so long that I wondered. Soon I was beside him, following his example. And there, not ten feet below the surface, was a glittering yellow mass, polished to a glowing burnish by the attrition of the walls, and lighted up into a glorious mellow blaze by the rays of the morning sun. So intently was I feasting my eyes on this marvelous spectacle that for a moment my attention strayed from Robert. A gurgling laugh from him startled me.

“Robert!” I called.

He turned upon me the strangest face that I have ever seen lighting up the soul of a mortal. It seemed of an incredible age. His eyes were sunk deep in their sockets, and volcanic fires burned in their depths; his cheeks showed extreme emaciation; his whole face was marbled with the ultimate hardness and coldness of greed.

“At last!” he gasped, a tremor of fire and ice racking his every member.

At this point the rent was about three feet wide—a comfortable width in which to quarry the metal. The opposing faces of the walls carried numerous jagged projections, which afforded reasonably safe footing to a nimble climber.

Robert was sating his senses as he lay gazing down upon his treasure. “We are rich, old man,” he said, again turning his face toward me—that terrible, hideous face. “Rich!” he went on. “This is not a poor man’s world. In comparison with us, Monte Cristo was a beggar. Ah, rich—rich!”

A little longer he lay thus, and then cau-

tiously swung over the edge of the abyss, planted his feet wisely, worked slowly and cautiously down, and stood abreast of the treasure. He passed his hand caressingly over its burnished surface; he kissed it—he would have hugged the mountain. Then, chopping, prying, digging with his hatchet, he worked slowly, quarrying out the gold. Thick jagged lumps came away in his hand, and each one he would hold exultingly up for me to see.

A strange sickness assailed me. Something within me revolted.

“Robert,” I said, “it makes me sick to look into the chasm. I will go a little distance away and wait for you.”

“That is well, old man,” he replied, bestowing another nugget in his leather bag.

I withdrew and lay down a few yards away, where I found a level spot. A choking dizziness came upon me. I fought against it, but could not conquer it. A brilliant mirage painted on the face of the desert seemed so vivid that I accepted it as a reality, and wondered that I was not surprised to see a beautiful island covered with rich verdure and towered castles, and encompassed by a shoreless green sea, where before the blazing dead desert had stretched in forbidding majesty to the horizon. An oppressive, stifling numbness crept over me. Other visions appeared. A battle of the gods was being fought in the sky; I could dimly see the charging hosts, and faintly hear the sounds of the onslaught. Nearer they came and louder grew the tumult. The earth shook with the trampling of the hosts.

Above the din rose a fearful cry, as though there were concentrated in it all the agonies of the dying and frenzied hosts in battle. It was so terrible, so penetrating that it sent a shock through every fiber of my body. I leaped to my feet, and instantly fell. For a moment I thought that dizziness accounted for my helplessness, but when my senses had more fully returned I realized that an earthquake was tossing the mountain. In that horrible realization I had forgotten the cry that had roused me. I thought of dear old Robert. On my hands and knees I crept to the edge of the chasm, and there the most dreadful of all the happenings of that wild time unfolded its tragedy before me.

In the trembling of the earth Robert was finding it almost impossible to keep his place. A foot would be shaken off; he would cling to the opposing walls with his hands. Once or twice he made a desperate effort to ascend, but he needed all his strength and wits to guard his safety where he stood. Beneath him yawned the chasm.

It was his cry that had roused me. I called reassuringly to him, and that seemed to give him strength. He was not far below my reach, but, stretch and strain as I might, it was impossible for us to bring our hands together. I began to enter the chasm, but he called to me with an agonized protest to refrain.

The trembling of the mountain was growing in intensity. Then a vast new danger presented itself—the width of the

chasm was changing! At one moment it would narrow, at another widen. Robert locked up into my face. For the first time since our boyhood there sat upon him the sweet old expression of happy days. He smiled faintly and calmly. I covered my eyes and drew back. At that moment, with one mighty convulsion, the chasm closed tight from the bottom of the mountain to the top, and all that was left was a snugly fitted seam.

And there I left my dear old Robert entombed in the everlasting rock, held forever in the golden sepulcher that the great Mother had devised. Only the vast silent spirit of the desert piloted me thence, and set a seal upon my return that nothing but death can break.

LOVE'S PROOFLESSNESS.

BY CHARLES P. NETTLETON.

Pain may display and prove herself at need:
 She hath a tongue wherewith to tell her woe
 What time the heart no longer dares to go
 Along the way alone; and she may feed
 Upon the gestures of despair, and plead
 In silence deep; and, last of ways that show
 And ease the aching heart, the blessed flow
 Of tears may prove and succor her indeed.

But what hath joy of outward sign or grace?
 How canst thou know my joy in loving thee?
 No words avail nor play of eyes or face,
 And tears are meet but when thy tears I see.
 Love thou, sweetheart, and love shall prove apace
 How proofless yet how perfect love may be.

